

than the rest. I also saw that the entire underparts, from chin to under tail coverts and vent, were spotless white. The legs were light pinkish in colour. I had the *Pictorial Guide* in my hand while observing this bird. Since the bird is extremely rare in India, I checked the identifying features many times over till I was sure about its identity.

Ali & Ripley (1983a) give the distribution in India as - "A straggler in winter and during migration. Haldibari duars, Bengal 18 February 1932 (Inglis coll., Brit. Mus.); Manipur, a party in April (Hume)". In the footnote about *Erythacus cyane* it gives the following information - "A specimen in the Pinwill coll. (Brit. Mus.) is labelled Simla but 'Simla' is written in such a way that it evidently was not written at the time though it is Pinwill's writing"

(Whistler's MS). An observation by Magrath in Hazara in June (*JBNHS* 18: 197) certainly pertains to *Muscicapa leucomelanura*, as does one from Narkanda, c. 35 km NE. of Simla (von Pelzeln, *Ibis* 1868: 310). Ali and Ripley (1983b) give the distribution as "Isolated records from Bengal duars, Manipur and S. Andamans".

My record from Pauri may point out that *Erythacus cyane* may be a straggler to Western Himalayas and there is a likelihood that the specimen from the Pinwill collection was correctly labelled.

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17. STATUS OF THE GHARIAL *GAVIALIS GANGETICUS* IN THE MAIN BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER

(With one text-figure)

In the Brahmaputra river, the gharial *Gavialis gangeticus* was once fairly common (Cooper 1873), but now it is rarely seen and its future is bleak. In some recent works (Singh 1991; Whitaker and Basu 1992), its status in the Brahmaputra river was not dealt with in detail and its current status is unclear. Moreover, information provided by Singh (1991) referring to Singh, Kar and Choudhury (1984) does not seem to be based on actual field study. The only recent information on the species from a part of the river is from Choudhury (1992). Cooper (1951 a, b) covered the Barak river system, erroneously referred to by Singh (1991) and Singh, Kar and Choudhury (1984).

During the past decade, I carried out field work in different parts of the Brahmaputra river as part of a broader survey on wildlife. The data collected on the occurrence of the gharial are presented below.

c. 1979: One seen near Tekeliphuta, near Lakhimpur-Jorhat inter-district boundary, in the afternoon hours. It was about 2.5 - 3.0 metres long.

1981-83: A large gharial seen near Rangdoi, now part of Dibru-Saikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary, Tinsukia district; it was 4.5 - 5.0 m long.

1982: One seen near Baluchar, now part of Dibru-Saikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary, Tinsukia district.

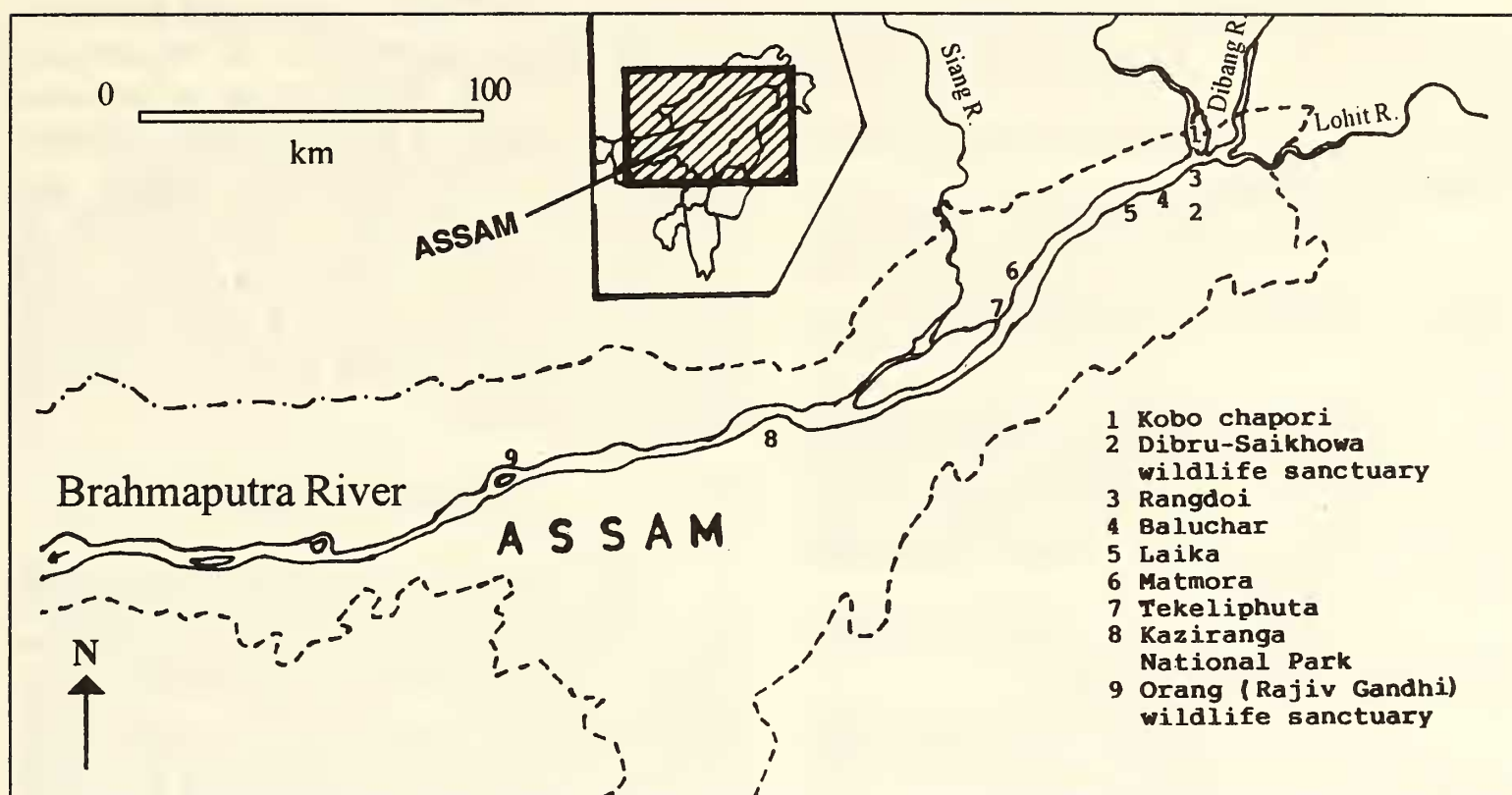


Fig. 1. Occurrence of the Gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*) along the Brahmaputra river.

1982-83: One seen by Mising tribal people near Matmora, Lakhimpur district (Choudhury 1992).

1982-84: One caught in trap especially set up for the gharial near Rangdoi, now part of Dibru-Saikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary in Tinsukia district.

c. 1983: One seen basking on the river bank near Dibru-Saikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary: it was about 4 m in length.

1986: (a) Two seen near a pool of the river, in January-February. They were of the same size (about 2 m long) and were basking near Baluchar, now part of Dibru-Saikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary, Tinsukia district.

(b) One seen near Tekeliphuta, near Lakhimpur-Jorhat inter-district boundary (Choudhury 1992).

(c) One seen in the river near Laika Forest Village, Dibru-Saikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary, near the inter-district boundary of Tinsukia and Dibrugarh.

1988: (a) One seen near Tekeliphuta, near Lakhimpur-Jorhat inter-district boundary (Choudhury 1992). It was about 2.5 m long.

(b) One seen basking on the sandy river banks near Kaziranga National Park; it was about 3.5 m long.

1991: (a) One seen in June-July near Bontapu Beat on the river bank in Orang Wildlife Sanctuary, Darrang dist.

(b) One seen in late afternoon in the Siang river between Poba Reserved Forest and Kobo Chapori in the Dhemaji dist.; it was a small specimen, about 1.5 m long. The upper reaches of the Brahmaputra are known as Siang (from near Kobo Chapori in Assam to the Indo-China border in Arunachal Pradesh).

1992: One seen in May-June on the banks near Phansidia Laika-gaon, a Forest Village in Dibru-Saikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary, Tinsukia.

1992-93: Two sightings near Azan Pir's Dargah, Dikhowmukh in Sibsagar district. One and two specimens sighted respectively.

The gharial has become extremely rare in the Brahmaputra river and its extinction from the entire river system in northeastern India seems to be only a matter of time. The existence of any viable breeding population is unlikely. The main reasons for its decline are:

(1) Heavy year-round use of the river for commercial fishing. The entire river-bed is leased out to *Mahaldars* (contractors) who employ all types of fishing methods including gillnets for commercial fishing.

(2) Encroachment of basking and breeding grounds by humans for setting up fishing camps and for settlement (on the higher banks near the beaches).

(3) Chasing and killing any gharial sighted. There was a case of deliberate poaching between 1982-84 when one gharial was caught in a trap made of many harpoons, in the Brahmaputra river in Tinsukia dist.

(4) Siltation of river-bed due to heavy deforestation at different places.

Although it is difficult to assess the current population size of the gharial in the river, it may be as low as 20 individuals, mostly eastwards of Kaziranga.

No report on breeding could be gathered during the survey. Sighting of young gharials (such as a specimen of about 1.5 m long in the Siang river in 1991) suggests that breeding may still happen in some remote areas of the Siang river in Arunachal Pradesh.

Conservation action for the gharial in the Brahmaputra river should be taken up on a priority basis. Since gharial conservation in other areas, notably Nepal, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa has been successful

to a great extent, there is every reason to assume that the same can be done in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Already there are protected areas with potential gharial habitat notably Kaziranga, Dibru-Saikhowa, Orang and Burhachapori in Assam, and D'Ering in Arunachal Pradesh. Release of captive bred gharial into these protected areas must be seriously considered if the species is to survive in the Brahmaputra.

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